



OFFICE OF
NATIONAL ESTIMATES

MEMORANDUM

Prospects For Egypt Without Nasser

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16 November 1970

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Prospects for Egypt Without Nasser^{*}

NOTE

The six weeks which have passed since Nasser's death have seen his associates and subordinates maneuvering for power and attempting to carry on the business of governing Egypt. This memorandum assesses what they have done and offers some judgments on probable future trends. It is written in full awareness that there is much we do not know about what has gone on behind the scenes and relationships among the various Egyptian leaders.

* This memorandum was prepared by the Office of National Estimates. It was discussed with representatives of the Office of Current Intelligence and the Clandestine Services, who are in general agreement with its judgments.

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1. Although the official mourning period for Gamal Abdel Nasser has ended, the consequences of his death for Egypt, the Arabs, and the world are far from clear. Information on events behind the scenes in Egypt is scanty indeed, and judgments about the future are highly speculative. The leaders chosen in more than a month of maneuvering are drab and unprepossessing, but they hold the instruments of power. They will not inspire the Egyptian people, but they may be able to control them. In the months ahead, they are likely to stick as close as possible to the course prescribed by their late hero -- in any event, they will claim to be doing so. Nevertheless, Nasser's death portends change. His heirs have individual ambitions, prejudices, and fears. They inevitably will be faced with decisions for which there is no specific precedent. Variant interpretations of Nasser's words and thoughts are likely to thrive as the Middle East in general and Cairo in particular learn to get along without the man who was the area's outstanding figure for more than 15 years.

I. UNCERTAINTY AT HOME

2. Egypt has become accustomed to the leadership of one powerful and decisive man. It now faces rule by a group of

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men without personal power or great popularity -- men who are likely to find decisions difficult to make. The individuals who were in charge of the government and political machinery at the time of Nasser's death appear to have agreed quite rapidly on one essential -- they, rather than any other Egyptians, should retain and share the power among themselves. The "outs" -- notably Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) members Zakariya Muhyi al-Din, Abd al-Latif Baghdadi, and Kamal al-Din Husayn -- made an ineffectual attempt to secure some role for themselves in the new regime. The "ins" united long enough to block them. The power of decision remained nominally with the eight-man Executive Committee of the Arab Socialist Union (ASU). Essentially, decisions were made by three members of that body (Anwar Sadat, Husayn Shafi, and Ali Sabri), together with three men affiliated with the police and intelligence services^{*} and General Fawzi, the head of the armed forces. Nasser's erstwhile spokesman, Hasanayn Haykal,

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had some voice in the early proceedings but developed political laryngitis somewhere along the way.

3. When Sadat was chosen as President, a triumvirate of three more or less coequal rulers appeared to be in the making. Rumor tagged Sabri and Sharawi Jumma, the Interior Minister, for Nasser's two remaining job titles -- Prime Minister and head of the ASU. Instead, after considerable delay, a veteran diplomat, Mahmud Fawzi, became Prime Minister and the Executive Secretary of the ASU was made Secretary General of the organization. Neither has previously had much political importance. After further hesitation, Sabri and Shafi were named Vice Presidents, without clearly delineated responsibilities or stated order of precedence. Subsequently, Sadat was made Chairman of the ASU; since the party has not previously had both a Secretary General and a Chairman simultaneously, the division of power is uncertain. The appointment of four Deputy Prime Ministers from the Cabinet is said to be pending.

4. Sadat, long thought to be an ineffective man, is emerging in a surprisingly strong position. He was, of course, the designated successor, but his initial acceptability as President apparently stemmed as much from his weaknesses as from his strengths. He had no particular power base, no

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known coterie of admirers, no identification with the major powers. He was, therefore, non-controversial. Now, however, he is the only member of the original RCC remaining in a powerful official position. We doubt that Sadat could have managed to exclude both Sabri and Shafi from key positions without considerable help. Sabri, at least, is almost certainly dissatisfied, and he can be expected to try to improve his status. We know next to nothing about the inner workings of Egyptian politics, but our best guess is that Sadat's most influential allies were Jumma, who retains the powerful Interior post, and Sami Sharaf, who continues as intelligence advisor and assistant to the President. We cannot now judge whether Jumma and Sharaf are acting from motives of self-preservation, personal ambition, loyalty to the late master, or some combination of the three. Neither has evidenced great ambition or incipient charisma in the past. They bear watching, however, as two of the dozen or so individuals who will be running Egypt during what promises to be a period of considerable -- though probably circumspect -- struggle for power and position.

5. The leadership and the public are likely to be hyper-suspicious of one another in the months ahead; the result could be a period of severe repression. Within Egypt, one of

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Nasser's greatest strength was the unflagging popular conviction that he cared about his people. Cairenes and others griped at his policies and grumbled at his mistakes, but they faulted him for not succeeding -- never for not trying. To the day of his death, the vast majority of the 33 million Egyptians trusted him. For his part, he resorted to repression infrequently and for brief periods; generally, his touch was light.

6. Sadat and company have had years to learn the obvious lesson, but they probably have not. They began their reign by trying to buy popularity; lowering prices of basic commodities, declaring an early distribution of industrial profits, and promoting a lot of civil servants. We believe, however, that they are likely to move rapidly and massively against people who show signs of dissent. The existence of several separate security networks, each with a leader who has ambitions for political survival if not greater political power, provides ample opportunity for fitful arrests, investigations, hunts, and purges. The opposite phenomenon -- development of an atmosphere in which alternative policies can be discussed and slightly unorthodox ideas vented -- would indicate that Egypt's new leaders have more political savvy and self-confidence than we currently credit them with.

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7. The leadership can expect to run into trouble with Egypt's student population. There are upwards of 240,000 enrolled in Egyptian universities; roughly 150,000 of them are in or near Cairo. They have numerous, basically insoluble grievances -- notably the lack of job opportunities after graduation. They have organizations that are supposed to be apolitical. They have chafed for years under restrictions on political activity, and such gripes have recently been reinforced by their vulnerability for military service. Student outbursts are nothing new for Egypt; Nasser himself took part in them as a teenager. Students got out of hand twice in 1968, and the nominal reforms that followed those demonstrations have not assuaged discontent. A great deal of pent up frustration is present; some incident may spark it. Student demonstrations might be incited or exacerbated by such elements as the Muslim Brotherhood -- a right-wing, politico-religious society -- or the adherents of one or more of the several small Communist factions. The result could be a serious breakdown of law and order in the cities.

8. The armed forces remain the regime's ultimate defense against student unrest or any other form of domestic political turmoil. Nasser never had to use major military force to control

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the civilian population; if the new regime were forced to call out the troops, we do not know what the response would be. The current armed forces chief, General Fawzi, is closely identified with the present leaders and probably would give the "correct" orders -- out of instincts of self-preservation, if not out of personal commitment. In the event of simple riot and disorder on the part of street mobs, the military probably would obey and intervene to impose calm. However, if trouble were to come in the form of a challenge to the personal power and prestige of Sadat, the military might stand aside. Sadat is not particularly popular with any known group of Egyptians, and he seems to be actively disliked by some considerable number of Egyptian military officers. In these circumstances, the regime will be very reluctant to trust the military in an internal security role, much preferring to rely on the substantial police establishment.

9. If there is a "new Nasser" -- or several -- in the Egyptian Armed Forces, he is well hidden from us. It seems logical to assume that there are majors, lieutenant colonels, and colonels who believe that they could do a better job of running Egypt than Sadat and his associates. Such men may be organized into clandestine groups and may be planning a coup.

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All in all, we doubt that a successful move along these lines is imminent. However, it will become more likely with the passage of time, if power in Cairo remains fragmented and various civilians and perhaps military leaders compete for position and popularity. A resumption of active hostilities in the Canal area would initially tend to damp down any coup-making tendencies. If the Israelis again got the best of it, as they likely would, the prospects for military mutiny might rise.

10. There is a notable paucity of promising alternatives to the present collective leadership. In the days immediately following Nasser's death only one name was fairly frequently mentioned with approval -- that of Zakariya Muhyi al-Din. Among some sizable segment of the Egyptian middle classes, and among the military officers who make up an influential part of that group, he apparently enjoys approbation, though he does not arouse bounding enthusiasm. As an original member of the RCC, a competent high official, and the man Nasser designated as successor in the immediate aftermath of the June 1967 war, he looked like a serious contender for at least a share of power in 1970. Whether or not he tried strenuously to push his claim we cannot say, but he failed in whatever efforts he made. There

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are reports that he intends to remain politically inactive, giving Sadat and company time to blunder, in the hope that he will be called in to rectify their mistakes. However, he has no official position and no organized mass support; he has thus far shown little facility for political maneuvering. A military coup -- carried off in his name but perhaps without his knowledge -- seems more likely than a deliberate power grab actively led by Muhyi al-Din.

11. It is possible, though it does not seem likely, that Nasser's death could invigorate the political institutions that he created but kept impotent. Since his death, his old comrades have scrupulously followed the letter of the Constitution. Decisions have been promulgated in the name of the Executive Committee of the ASU, ratified by the National Assembly, and -- in the case of the presidency -- approved by the entire membership of the ASU. The new leadership has announced regular, periodic meetings of the Executive Committee, the Central Committee, the Cabinet, etc. Without Nasser to quote as the authority, they have quoted the names of the institutions. If internal power struggles are indecisive, with various factions cancelling one another out behind closed doors for months or even years, the repeated invocation and use of the various legal entities could in time give them some real authority.

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12. The stress on institutions, rather than individuals, has been reflected in Soviet press commentary on Egypt and in what we have heard of private Soviet advice to the new leaders. The USSR probably hopes to avoid too close identification with one or another faction that might develop. The new Egyptian leadership, unsure of itself, may be inclined to accept Soviet advice somewhat more readily than Nasser was; at the same time, it may be less able than Nasser to carry out whatever promises it might make -- to Moscow or to anyone else.

13. The same major factors that contributed to steadily increasing Soviet influence over the past regime will continue to be operative. Soviet friendship and assistance is vital to the Egyptians in their confrontation with Israel; for Cairo, there is no alternative. Immediately after Nasser's death, Moscow hastened to assure the Egyptians, both privately and publicly, that Soviet support would continue unabated. In the future as in the past, overt Soviet pressure is likely to be limited to specific questions of great concern to the USSR. Barring a major change in the Egyptian regime, or a substantial amelioration of the confrontation with Israel, we see no reason to expect Soviet influence on the Egyptian leaders to diminish.

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II. VACILLATION ABROAD

Don't Shoot, Don't Talk, Don't Move

14. In Egypt, continuation of the ceasefire along the Suez Canal clearly is desired and intended. There is considerable evidence that the Egyptian military leadership is especially anxious to avoid subjecting its forces again to the punishment they underwent in daily Israeli air raids earlier this year. At the same time, leaders in Cairo cannot agree to accept indefinite continuation of the ceasefire, since to do so would imply acknowledgment that Israeli occupation of Sinai was, for all practical purposes, permanent. However, we do not believe that Egypt will deliberately resume large-scale fighting along the Canal in the near term.

15. For Egypt's collective leadership, any kind of major decision will be difficult -- a decision to make significant concessions in an attempt to get to a settlement may be virtually impossible. On the other hand, the new leaders must devote more attention than Nasser to consolidating their position domestically, and they are likely to be inclined to put Egyptian interests ahead of Arab interests; they may be willing to make some concessions on that account. They have been somewhat less isolated than Nasser from dissenting opinion and may be less

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convinced than he was about the dedication of the Egyptian people to the anti-Israeli cause. If they find themselves in a position where they must act quickly and decisively, it is conceivable that they might seize an opportunity to move toward settlement. But Sadat and company are not likely to accept terms Nasser had publicly rejected.

16. Constrained as they are by Nasser's policies, and uncertain about the political reliability of the armed forces, the new leaders are highly unlikely to take any steps that would antagonize the Egyptian military or materially weaken the Egyptian position along the Canal. The Egyptian military suffered very heavy casualties in the months before defenses along the Canal were strengthened. Egyptian military personnel know that Israel's inventory of Phantom aircraft, which have been invested with a mystique even more powerful than their impressive military potential, has increased since the cease-fire went into effect. The Israelis have announced that their own position has markedly improved. In these circumstances -- and barring extraordinary Israeli concessions -- the Egyptian leaders are highly unlikely to agree to any redistribution of Egyptian men, missiles, or other materiel that would materially weaken Egyptian defense in the area between the Canal and Cairo.

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Arab Affairs

17. Nasser's special position cannot be fully duplicated. It was, in part, the product of circumstances. He was one of the most prominent revolutionary leaders in the underdeveloped world. He had available a remnant of Western colonialism -- the British Army -- and expelled it. He pulled off the first major nationalization in the Middle East. He caught on early to the game of non-alignment and played it while it was still lucrative in both money and prestige. Opportunities to make a similar mark in the world at large are not likely to be available to any Egyptian -- or other Arab -- any time soon.

18. Nasser managed his roles as Egyptian leader and as Arab leader more or less in tandem. His victories on the Arab stage consolidated his position at home; his losses never seriously endangered his primacy in Egypt. His successors, beginning without mass popularity in Egypt and without great prestige on the Arab scene, will have to be much more circumspect about risks to their position. It is difficult to envisage Anwar Sadat -- or any of the others now in charge -- calling and presiding over an acrimonious meeting of King Hussein and Fatah chief Arafat and bringing a Tunisian into play as

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mediator. Nevertheless, Sadat has moved one step closer to some form of association with Libya and the Sudan. Any effective "federation", however, appears distant in time and difficult of accomplishment.

19. Inter-Arab relations are due to change somewhat. Nasser in his last several years was a conservative in Arab politics. Preoccupied with Israel, having certain common interests with Hussein in the aftermath of the 1967 war, dependent on the Khartoum subsidies, and himself alarmed at the fedayeen as a potential threat to existing governments, he generally worked to avoid unsettling challenges to prevailing authority in the Arab world. His death, therefore, removes a force for stability. Moreover, with Nasser gone, traditional antipathies between Egyptians and other Arabs are likely to become somewhat more obvious.

20. We doubt, however, that an increase in deliberate Egyptian troublemaking is in the cards. Rather, Sadat and company probably will go on hosting Arab meetings, organizing Arab diplomats at the United Nations, and financing pro-Egyptian political groups wherever they exist. But, their efforts and concerns will be concentrated principally on domestic matters,

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on assuring a large and continuing flow of military aid from the USSR, and on the Egyptian-Israeli military/diplomatic calculus.

21. Yet, they will not be ignored outside the Nile Valley. For 15 years, Cairo's voice has counted more than any other in Arab decisions; the habit of listening to Cairo will not easily be unlearned. The Egyptians are the most numerous and best organized body of Arabs. Cairo has long been one of the cultural centers of the Arab world. Cairo controls by far the strongest propaganda network in the area. Its military forces and equipment make it of central importance to the Arabs in their confrontation with Israel. The other Arab countries are accustomed to considering, if not always following, Egypt's policy on all international issues and many domestic ones. In losing Nasser, Egypt has been weakened -- but not eliminated -- as the single most potent political entity in the Arab world and as a force on the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean scene.

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